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The Life and Dramatic Works of Robert Montgomery Bird, by CLEMENT E. FOUST, Ph. D. New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1919. x + 725 pp.

It is a pleasure to note the continued activity of investigators in the field of American drama—until recent years a neglected branch of our literature. The latest proof of this activity is Dr. Clement E. Foust's volume on Robert Montgomery Bird, which contains a critical biography of over 150 pages and four of his plays, published from the manuscripts.

As the author states in the preface, there has hitherto been a total lack of a biography of Bird; hence the material we find here came entirely from first-hand sources. It is cause for wonder that the writer of once famous plays and of novels still read should have been thus overlooked, and we are indebted to Dr. Foust for bringing him clearly to our knowledge.

Like other of the earlier American authors, Bird (whose dates are 1806 to 1854) found that literature had few rewards to offer save discouragement and poverty, yet literature in one form or another instead of medicine, for which he prepared himself, was through life his principal vocation. The external obstacles which checked his aspirations, as well as those of numerous contemporaries, were mainly two: First, the people of the United States entertained a strange contempt for American literature, finding the British importations much more to their taste. Secondly, the absence of international copyright laws operated very unfavorably against the American writer. Since publishers in this country were at liberty to reprint English successes without payment to the author, they saw little logic in exchanging good dollars for uncertain native productions. Moreover the lax state of the national copyright worked against the dramatist, who was compelled to give over the unrestricted right of representation to one manager, with the probability that the text would be sadly garbled, and the certainty that the remuneration would be meagre.

Nevertheless Bird achieved honorable results both with his dramas and with his novels. *The Gladiator* and *The Broker of Bogota* were long popular on the stage, while *Calavar* and *Nick of the Woods* have thrilled readers for generations.

Dr. Foust presents in rapid survey the events of Bird's life, and

contrives to give an impression of his attractive, high-minded and courageous personality. No doubt lack of space and perhaps scarcity of material led to condensation on the part of the biographer; but a more leisurely treatment, which would have given opportunity for ampler development of Bird's winning character, would have been welcome.

Dr. Foust's critical estimates are conservative and just. Bird is appraised as somewhat of a pioneer, since, like Brockden Brown, he became a professional writer before writing was a well established profession in America. The two plays already mentioned are judged to have "permanently enriched our dramatic material." His novels "are essentially boys' books"; yet they possess a conscientious workmanship, a wholesome treatment of character, and a vivid and dramatic style that "once and for all discourage invidious comparisons, as have been made, between them and the 'dime-novel.'"

The style of the book is thoroughly readable, but it has been made business-like at the expense of the ease and charm one desires in biographical writing. The fault of repetition is somewhat noticeable: the writer is too fond of the expression "to a degree"; three times we are told that Bird was one of the first to explore Mammoth Cave; and three times his reasons for abandoning plays for novels are set forth.

Perhaps the chief defect of the monograph is that no attempt is made to place Bird in the literary movements of his time. Because the greater part of the volume is given over to the dramas, we might rightly expect a discussion of their relation to the dramatic tendencies of that period. We are not told that of the many American playwrights who had essayed blank verse tragedy, Bird was among the first to produce a distinguished stage success; or that in writing two tragedies on classic themes he was both following and giving impetus to one of the dramatic currents of the time; or that in basing two plays on Spanish American life he was showing the influence of Kotzebue's earlier but still frequently acted tragedies on that theme, and possibly also of Irving's historical work.

It may not be out of place here to point out a misleading statement in *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (vol. I, p. 309) to the effect that Bird's Mexican novels owed something to

Prescott's history. As a matter of fact Bird forsook this field eight years before *The Conquest of Mexico* appeared.

Of peculiar value is the second part of the book, made up of four plays printed from the Bird manuscripts in the possession of the University of Pennsylvania. To be sure *The Broker of Bogota* was published in Professor Arthur Hobson Quinn's *Representative American Plays* (1917), but *Pelopidas*, *The Gladiator*, and *Oralloossa* are here first made accessible to the public. That these dramas were all written for the famous Edwin Forrest, an actor of the athletic and not of the intellectual school, is apparent. Like the plays of Marlowe, which were probably shaped to the Herculean proportions of Edward Alleyn, they display sweep rather than profundity of conception, and largeness rather than subtlety of characterization. Yet in the protagonist of *The Broker of Bogota* Bird has presented a figure at once heroic and veracious, the most human of his creations. This factor, coupled with the careful construction of the play, gives it claim to rank as the greatest American tragedy prior to the Civil War, with the exception of George Henry Boker's *Francesca da Rimini* (1855).

The present reviewer regrets that Dr. Foust was unable to find room for Bird's manuscript comedy, *News of the Night*. True, it was an early effort and remained unacted; but the complications of the intrigue are ingeniously managed, and the genuine vivacity of the humor reveals an element of the author's equipment that might not be suspected from the tragedies.

A portrait-frontispiece, bibliographies of printed works and contributions to magazines, and an index complete a volume that commends itself throughout for the freshness and interest of the material.

ORAL SUMNER COAD.

Columbia University.
